DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 269 774 CS 209 726

AUTHOR Tolliver, Johnny E.
TITLE Discipline, Discipline, and Discipline: The Hegemony of Writing in American Education.
PUB DATE Nov 85
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (75th, Philadelphia, PA, November 22-27, 1985).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Curriculum Problems; Educational Needs; Higher Education; *Intellectual Disciplines; Leadership; *Professional Development; *Professional Recognition; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Behavior; Teacher Role; Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

Writing is a threefold discipline that occupies a supreme place in American education, and without which there can be no other learning. Writing is not only a body of knowledge; it is also a set of acquired habits, and a frame of mind and attitude with which a writing task is approached. Writing may be defined in three ways, as (1) a discipline; that is, a domain of learning, with its own vocabulary or jargon, principles, facts, and accumulation of theory and research; (2) a skill; and (3) an art--the ability to make words and ideas eternal. The acquired habits include the grammatical usage, writing practices, and strategies that are manifested when pencil is put to paper. The attitudes and behaviors of professional teachers of writing are critical. Teachers are confused about what should be taught and how to teach it. In some instances teachers are encouraging free thinking and trying to activate some mechanism within their students to help them make writing, thinking, reading, listening, speaking, and studying a circle of activities. In others, teachers are imposing form, insisting on correctness while inhibiting free and creative and critical thinking. Teachers need to make uniform, on a national level, standards and objectives for writing programs for all levels in the educational system. Writing programs should also be accredited. Perhaps such actions will inject discipline into the profession. (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED269774

Johnny E. Tolliver
Department of English
United States Military Academy
West Point, New York

Discipline, Discipline, and Discipline: The Hegemony of Writing in American Education

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Johnny E. Tolliver

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 209 726

In the April 1985 issue of College English, Mike Rose brings into sharp focus some of the issues surrounding the catastrophic problem of writing illiteracy. He gives us small pieces from documents prepared during a recent faculty debate in UCLA's Academic Senate over whether a course in their freshman writing sequence was indeed remedial. He provides these samples:

> "How many 'minor errors' are acceptable?"
>
> "We must try to isolate and define those further skills in composition."
>
> ". . . we should provide a short remedial course to patch up any deficiencies."
>
> "Perhaps the most striking feature of this campus' (sic) siege against illeteracy."
>
> "One might hope that, after a number of years, standards might be set in the high schools which would allow us to abandon our own defensive program." (341)

Rose goes on to place these "snippets" in perspective:

> There are five ideas about writing implicit in these comments: Writing ability is judged in terms of the presence of error and can thus be quantified. Writing is a skill or a tool rather than a discipline. A number of our students lack this skill and must be remediated. In fact, some percentage of our students are, for all intents and purposes, illiterate. Our remedial efforts, while currently necessary, can be phased out once the literacy crisis is solved in other segments of the educational system. (341)

In his essay Rose discusses these five implicit ideas which really define the pervasive attitude among educators and non-educators about the writing problem. I think what is even more worrisome about these ideas is that many of us who are English teachers have this attitude about writing.

One of these ideas has arrested my attention for some time now, and that is the one which questions whether or not writing is a discipline. I say unequivocally that it is a discipline, and, indeed, a threefold discipline that occupies a supreme place in American education, for without writing there can be no other learning. To be sure, writing is a body of knowledge; it is also a set of acquired habits; and it is a frame of mind, and attitude, with which we must approach the teaching of writing.

In a sense, good writing, or for that matter poor writing, is a set of habits that we manifest when we put pencil to paper. We who are teachers should know rules of grammar and standards of correctness and style in composition. Our students, however, may not know and probably do not care to know rules of grammar and principles of composition. Instead of imposing structures on student writing, what we ought to do--and I know that many of us are--is "provoke or cajole . . . nurse or embarrass" our students into finding themselves through their writing. (Fadiman and Howard 17-18). And then, once we can get students to find themselves, their own identity and voice, I think it is much easier to teach them habits of grammatical usage and writing practices and strategies. The continuing debate over process and form is a healthy one, and I choose to work within the middle ground where both process and form co-exist.

We must dig the grave and bury forever the argument over whether or not writing is a discipline, a body of knowledge. Certainly it is. If we accept the notion that a discipline is a domain of learning, with its own vocabulary or jargon, principles, facts, and an accumulated body of theory and research, then writing certainly fits the bill. Writing is also a skill, a set of techniques and practices that we must use and improve upon in order to communicate our ideas. Writing, for some, is an art, a special ability and artifices that some have mastered, investing language with the power to make words and ideas eternal. Therefore, writing is all these things--a discipline, a skill and an art.

Writing in a third sense of discipline--a word that labels our own attitudes and behavior as professional teachers of writing--is most critical, I think, to our solving the writing crisis. Whatever we say about writing, we as teachers cannot ignore the fact that this crisis has yoked strange bedfellows into a universal frustration and grief over how poorly our students write. And the way we conduct ourselves as we struggle to cure this malaise can tell much about us as professionals. At this point in time, however, we are not as disciplined a

profession as we ought to be.

Let me give some instances of what I see as problems of discipline among us. At one college in Virginia, all teachers of freshman English design their own course, choose their own texts, and do just about whatever they want to do. At a community college in New Jersey, a composition workgroup has designed a course that is supposed to emphasize process, and yet half of their composition sections are taught by part-timers whom no plan exists to orient them to the course. Moreover, in an exit exam from the course, students must write at least a four-paragraph essay. Is this not imposing a structure, a form, in what is supposed to be a composition course emphasizing processs? At the University of Michigan the writing program is not found in the English department because school officials decided that to serve the best interests of the student, the course would fare better <u>outside</u> the jurisdiction of the English department. (Robinson 487-83) At a college in Mississippi students learn to write by first writing sentences, then paragraphs of cause and effect, comparison and contrast, etc., and then a "unified" essay. Still in other colleges, for instance where I work, teachers have a common syllabus, students write the same kind of exercise in each section, have the same final examination, and teachers meet regularly to discuss the course and student progress. In fine, we are teaching too many different types of composition courses to our students. Sometimes in the same school, we teach composition courses diametrically opposed to each other. In one instance teachers are encouraging free thinking and trying to activate some mechanism within their students to help them make writing, thinking, reading, listening, speaking, and studying a circle of connected activities. In others we are imposing form, insisting on correctness while inhibiting free and creative and critical thinking. In one composition course a student will learn that he thesis statement <u>must</u> appear as the final sentence of the first paragraph. Then that same student will take another composition course at the

same school, and the teacher will say, "Don't write introductions like this one", the one with the thesis statement as the last sentence of the first paragraph. No wonder our students are confused and "come into the job market unable to write, fearful of writing" (Wheeler 1). We are also confused about what we should teach and how we should teach. We are not as disciplined as we ought to be.

Corporations, government agencies, and the military are becoming impatient with colleges and unversities. The former are designing their own writing courses. The Army has just established its own Army Writing Program. We need to reassert our influence and control over the teaching of writing. We need to be bold and say to the American public what the educational system and we as teachers and scholars have to do in order to enable our students to write, to complete the circle of the literacy connections. In a recent conversation I held with an elementary school teacher, she said that a textbook review committee at her school, of which she was a member, after having reviewed textbooks for two years, had been unable to find a book that would give their teachers the "step-by-step" process they needed in order to teach their students from K-6 how to write. On the other hand, such reading books are plentiful. We all know that the writing problem is systemic, and we, members of this national organization, need to provide teachers at the elementary and secondary schools the tools they need in order to begin to turn this writing problem around. "Only the requirement to write [day by day] week by week, year by year, throughout grammar and high school and college will produce literate Americans" (Wheeler 22). We need to make uniform, on a national level, standards and objectives for writing programs for all levels in our educational system. It seems to me that we need to think seriously about <u>accrediting</u> writing programs. This accrediting scheme, for which I have some nascent ideas, might be the only saving grace for writing fluency in this country, and for injecting discipline into our profession.

Works Cited

Fadiman, Clifton and James Howard. Empty Pages: A Search for Writing Competence in School and Society. Belmont, California: Fearon Pitman Publishers, 1979.

Rose, Mike. "The Language of Exclusion: Writing Instruction at the University." College English April 1985: 341-359.

Robinson, Jay L. "Literacy in the Department of English." College English September 1985: 482-498.

Wheeler, Thomas G. The Great American Writing Block: Causes and Cures of the New Illiteracy. New York: The Viking Press, 1979.